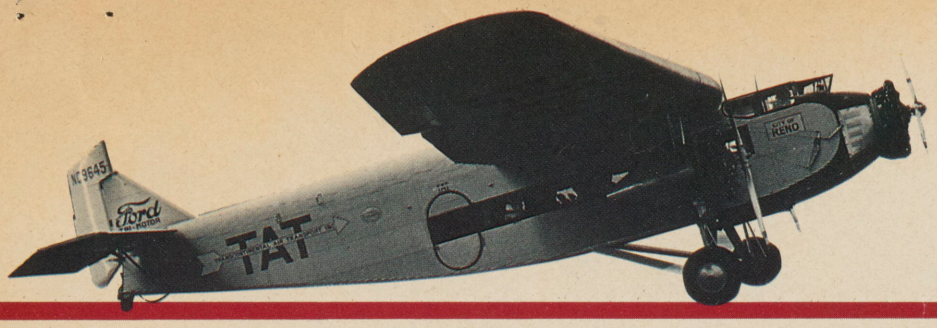


The custom-built Duesenberg roadster rolled to a stop in front of the Spanish-style terminal building. A chartered Cadillac limousine and a Rolls-Royce pulled in behind it. The beautiful people had arrived at the airport.

Today we would call them jet-setters. In 1928 no one had ever heard of a jet engine. The airport was Grand Central Air Terminal, just across the river from Griffith Park. It was actually in the city of Glendale, but it was the main airport for Los Angeles. It was the arrival and departure point for movie stars and business tycoons, as well as such aviation celebrities as Amelia Earhart, Eddie Rickenbacker, Glenn Martin and Charles Lindbergh.

Hollywood's elite—the men in camel's hair polo coats, the ladies swathed in furs—would arrive in their handcrafted automobiles like gods and goddesses in their chariots and, after a farewell party, would board the Ford Tri-motors or the Fokker monoplanes and fly to New York; or, as the bible of show biz, *Variety,* put it, "wing to Gotham."

Winging to Gotham on the first scheduled airliners took 48 hours and it wasn't all winging. The service was pioneered in 1928 and became regularly scheduled in 1929. The planes flew in daylight only. As darkness approached, landings were made near a railroad stop and passengers spent the night sleeping comfortably in Pullman accommodations.

In the morning, it was back to the airways again and another long day at cruising speeds of about 110 miles an hour, less head winds. After another night on a train, on the morning of the third day the travelers would arrive in the New York City area at whatever airport happened to have weather fit for landing. At that, it was faster, if not better, than the crack trains which took five days. By 1930, the trains were phased out of the airline operations and Trans World Airlines (TWA) offered a 36-hour service including a 10-and-one-half hour hotel stopover in Kansas City.

Planes carrying only mail were proving the safety of night flying, and Charles Lindbergh had been hired to map out routes for a straight-through service. In 1932, TWA's tri-motored Fords flew the first day-and-night cross-country service in 24 hours and 42 minutes, and by 1934, Douglas DC-2s whacked the time down to 16 hours and provided the first real luxury airliner.

Like gods and goddesses, Hollywood's elite arrived to "wing to Gotham."

By the time the first day-and-night service was established in 1932, Grand Central Air Terminal proudly advertised that, as "the quickest and easiest airport to reach in the Los Angeles area," it was handling 3,000 passengers a month. It conveniently did not mention that most of the passengers were students and private fliers taking off for short hops around the airport pattern.

Today, Los Angeles International Airport (LAX) handles an average of 2.7 million passengers a month (1981 figures), and that is just passengers on airlines, not general aviation traffic. In those early days, however, LAX was just emerging from a single runway across a bean field and was known as Mines Field.

Grand Central also had but one runway, roughly east and west along the Los Angeles River bank. Just across the river, where the parking lot for the Los Angeles Zoo is today, was the large dirt field used as home base for the 40th Division Aviation Squadron, now known as the California Air National Guard.

Grand Central, just over the hill from Hollywood and just down the road from Warner Brothers Studio, was home for the dashing fliers of the movie colony. Charles Correll, Amos of *Amos 'N' Andy,* kept his Stinson monoplane there. Later, Edgar Bergen and Jimmy Stewart had private planes there, and so did many members of the Aviation Country Club, a group of business and entertainment leaders who used to fly away en masse for weekend gatherings at desert or coast resorts.

But the real glitter of Grand Central sparkled from the tiny terminal building, the arrival and departure point for Hollywood's stars, directors and producers. Flying in those days was not the routine commuting that it is today. Every flight was an adventure. There was no such thing as airline regulation. If you were a pilot with an airplane, you could call yourself an airline. Varney flew single-engined Lockheeds to San Francisco and T. Claude Ryan used his single-engine ships, forerunners of Lindbergh's plane, to carry passengers to San Diego. Maddux was one of the first lines with multi-engined equipment.

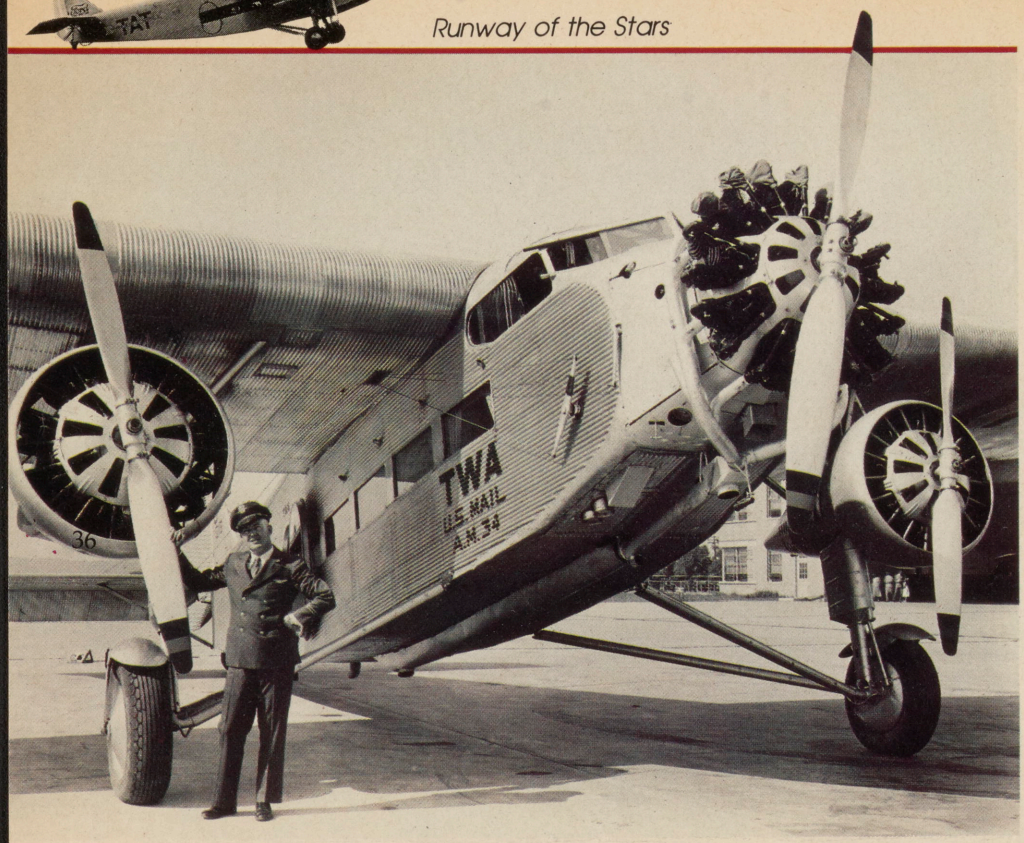
There were tri-motored and even four-motored airliners to inspire

Photographs courtesy American Airlines and Trans World Airlines

Runway of the Stars

Text by Paul Pierce

Saying bon voyage *before departing on an American Airlines flight is a group which includes Douglas Fairbanks, second from left; Mary Pickford; Charles Chaplin, front right of Miss Pickford; and Sam Goldwyn, far right. A Ford Tri-motor plane, top opposite page, carried the logo of an early aviation company, Transcontinental Air Transport, Inc., which later became TWA*



confidence in the passengers, but very few of them would maintain level flight with an engine out. Boeing, which today builds our biggest airliners, was selling its single-engined mail planes which could handle up to four passengers in an enclosed cabin; the pilot flew from an open cockpit behind them.

Joe Gilpin had a three-airplane airline running from Grand Central to San Diego using tri-motored Bach Air Transport monoplanes built out of plywood. They had a big engine in the nose and two smaller ones under the wings which were mainly there for reassurance.

The little one-man airlines and the homemade airplanes were only around for a few years. In the heyday of Grand Central the handmade planes were giving way to the first ships that could really be called airliners, planes like the well-engineered and well-built tri-motored Fords and the Fokkers.

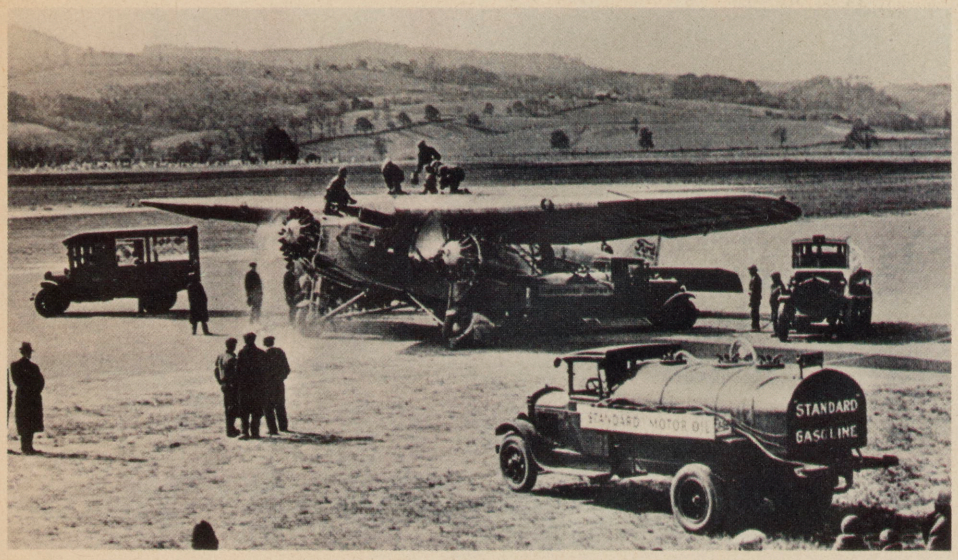
TWA commissioned Santa Monica-based Donald Douglas to build an airliner which would fly higher, farther and faster. The result was the DC-1. When it passed all its tests in 1933, it became the production line DC-2. American Airlines' search for a transcontinental plane led to the 1936 introduction of the highly popular DC-3.

With the coming of the big airplanes, big airports were needed and Grand Central's one short runway couldn't survive. Passenger service was shut down. The field was used for P-38 fighter training in World War II, but finally the whole airport was closed and is now a big complex of factories and engineering plants.

So Grand Central—heaven for starry-eyed kids who wanted to fly in the early days—is no more. Would-be pilots used to wash airplanes for free flights with the Wilson brothers, Roy and Al, at the old field. One of the Wilson airplanes was a Ryan monoplane, just like Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis* except that this one had an open-front cockpit for two instead of the huge gas tank that blocked Lindy's forward vision and forced him to fly to

Grand Central scenes, *clockwise, include a TWA mail plane; Will Rogers preparing to embark; and child star Shirley Temple overseeing the loading of film boxes*

In its heyday, Grand Central sparkles *with a Ford Tri-motor on the runway. TWA's* City of Indianapolis, *bottom left, is shown en route to Los Angeles on the nation's first transcontinental flight, in October 1930. Clark Gable and Carole Lombard smile to well-wishers, bottom right, before beginning a trip*



Paris using a periscope to see ahead.

Thomas B. Slate had a big hangar at the southeast corner of the field where he spent several years trying to build an all-metal dirigible. It never got off the ground. A pilot named Wally Timm did his own engineering, building and testing, and came up with a nice-flying little airplane. The Timm sold very well as a production model.

All this backyard aviation was the lifeblood of Grand Central Air Terminal, but the real claim to fame of the airport was the coming and going of such celebrities as Clark Gable, Knute Rockne, Louis B. Mayer, Mary Astor, Jack Warner and Joe E. Brown. Most stars and movie moguls of the late '20s and early '30s probably took off or landed there at least once.

The early flights, in the plane-train era, always took off very early in the morning, but that was no reason for skipping a gala plane-side bon voyage party. There would be champagne and ladyfingers and kisses all around before climbing into the waiting Tin Goose and winging away into the sunrise. Arrivals were a different matter. Incoming passengers were usually tired, slightly deaf and sometimes

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THE POINSETTIA KING

Continued from p. 30

The traditional *Christmas flower*

ber of cut flowers. In the greenhouses, an overhead network of very small pipelines permit the spreading of mist over the young plants. Boilers are housed in five nearby sheds, necessitated by the need to control temperature and humidity.

Near the main entrance on Saxony Road and alongside the driveway leading to the general offices are a number of white-fenced areas.

"All of that front yard," Ecke explains, "is for the use of 4-H Club groups. We always have had children here interested in farming, including Junior's children. Some of the others have been children or grandchildren of employees. Here these young farmers bring their chickens, rabbits, goats, sheep, cattle and swine in preparation for what they hope will be a showing at the San Diego county fair. They are prejudged here."

The Ecke work force normally approximates 120; at its peak in August it touches 200. Some employees have been with Ecke for more than 50 years. Three scientists, in a well-equipped laboratory, work on improving the flowers and trying to create new types. These researchers keep in close touch with colleagues in the United States Department of Agriculture and at universities.

For several summers the company has conducted a 10-week learn-and-work program on the ranch. The interns are young men and women and usually equally divided between Americans and foreigners. This year 14 attended. One each came from Italy and England and two each from the Netherlands and Germany; the others were from the University of Michigan.

The company pays a salary, provides room and board and furnishes automobiles for the students' use in their free time. The students are housed in large trailers.

The Ecke family donated the Ecke Family Building and five acres to Quail Botanical Gardens, a part of the San Diego County parks system. It gave land to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) in Encinitas. Another gift bears the name of Ecke Field, a playground for Little Leaguers. And beach property was donated to the State of California.

"Do you object to being called the poinsettia king?" Ecke was asked.

"I used to object to it. And I never wore the crown," he says. "But now, as long as they will mention poinsettias, I don't really care what they say about me."

Tips on keeping poinsettias in your house:

DAYLIGHT: For good results, keep the plant near a window or where there is a lot of natural light; insufficient light causes leaves to fall prematurely.

WATER: A slightly moist soil is required. Don't keep soil too wet; never let it get bone-dry.

TEMPERATURES: Poinsettias in bloom prefer cool temperatures. Normal household settings are ideal. Temperatures over 70 degrees Fahrenheit during the day or above 60 degrees at night will cause color to fade earlier than usual. Protect plant from temperatures below 50 degrees.

DRY AIR/DRAFTS: Poinsettias don't like them. Arid conditions could dehydrate the plant. Heating systems tend to lower relative humidity, causing dehydration. If this occurs, spray the entire plant with water, soak the soil, relocate the plant.

RUNWAY OF THE STARS

Continued from p. 37

airsick after a day or two cramped into a small, unpressurized airplane which flew at low altitudes.

These were the very first years of the aviation boom which was started by Lindbergh's solo flight to Paris in 1927. Celebrities such as Carole Lombard, Cecil B. De Mille, Mary Pickford and Samuel Goldwyn led the way and many of them became real aviation buffs.

One glorious sunny Sunday, Grand Central staged an open house. Three Ford Tri-motors flew over in formation, and after landing they were put to work taking the public on free rides around the airport. A pretty young lady did a parachute jump. Tex Rankin flew his little Great Lakes biplane down from Seattle and did a couple of outside loops for the crowd. Colonel Lindbergh was an advisor to TWA and he flew in for the occasion in a U.S. Army Air Corps pursuit plane and thrilled observing pilots with his skill in making a carefully controlled, power stall final approach over the fence, then a very short landing run.

Days like that, and the days the stars like Tom Mix, Gloria Swanson, Wallace Beery and Barbara Stanwyck came to fly, made Grand Central a place of unforgettable memories. You didn't see the celebrities walking through a huge terminal with a thousand others to board monstrous jets. You saw them arriving in sports cars and limousines, dining at the Sidewalk Cafe or having a drink in the Cockpit Bar. Then they would take a few steps to a little airplane that waited in front of the terminal and "wing to Gotham" or some other fabled destination.

The next time you have occasion to wing to Gotham or anyplace else, be grateful that you can do it at 35,000 feet, over the weather and with a drink in hand. But also try to envision what you missed, what it was like to be a starry-eyed observer at Grand Central Air Terminal.